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Research Monograph # 10

How can we make the study of "place" relevant and real to children?

Drawing on Children's "Sense of Place" – The Starting Point for Teaching Social Studies and Geography

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Research Tells Us

- When they are not at school, students tend to fall back on subjective, naïve and untested understandings.
- A "developmentally congruent" approach addresses the unique ways that children, at different ages, learn common concepts.
- Children have their own kind of geographical understanding, based on a developmental and formative relationship with familiar and valued places.

Elementary school children now and then report that what they learn in school sometimes seems disconnected from "real life" as they personally experience it outside of school. Unfortunately, children tend to assume that subject learning that doesn't feel real to them isn't real, or that its relevance ends when the school day is over. This is a common problem in many subject areas, especially social studies and geography. How can we make the study of "place" relevant and real to children? Would the social studies curriculum be strengthened if it took account of the ways in which children derive meaning and value from the real-life physical environments that are familiar to them?

Most teachers would agree that it is a fundamental goal of social studies education to induct students into the subject discipline of geography.[1] When students graduate from secondary school they should ideally have a solid understanding of the various facets of human and physical geography, as well as the unique skill sets that geographers routinely rely on (e.g., mapping and navigational tools).[2]

Unfortunately, presenting the discipline of geography to young children as a carefully sequenced, scientific study of place – one that is systematically presented but somewhat disconnected from children's personal lives – may not on its own be sufficient to promote learning. One of the unintended "lessons" of school, it seems, is that subject-related learning that is divorced from everyday life need not apply to everyday life, but only to the formal study of that particular subject and to work within institutions. Research has shown that most students, even at the university level, leave such learning at the classroom door; when they are not at school, students tend to fall back on "tried and true" but ultimately subjective, naïve and untested understandings about geography and other subjects.[3]

On the face of it, this is sure to be discouraging news for teachers. But research also indicates that children have their own kind of geographical understanding, one that is based on a uniquely developmental and formative relationship with familiar and valued places. A small but growing number of social studies teachers have recently begun to pay attention to the ways in which children value, find meaning in and make sense of their immediate environments, particularly their home, school and

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Building Literacy Skills ...

- Ask the students to write out the directions for getting from home to school. Encourage them to use phrases such as "turn left" or "drive to the next set of lights."
- Ask the students to describe what a favourite playspace or their bedroom looks like using words alone.
- Assign students the task of writing a descriptive paragraph that describes a key setting in a story the class is reading.
- Show the students a series of photographs of familiar and faraway places. Then have them write a descriptive paragraph that describes or compares and contrasts the places.
- Set up an obstacle course in the gymnasium and have the students write out the directions for successfully traversing it. Have the class work together to build a list of key phrases (e. g., jump over, crawl under and step through).

play spaces.[4] In moving students toward a more scholarly understanding of geography, some of these teachers are calling for a new approach to geography education that builds connections between familiar places and the social studies curriculum. The term adopted by advocates of this approach is "developmentally congruent," by which they mean a pedagogy that seeks to address the often unique ways in which children – at different ages – understand and make sense of common geographical concepts such as place and space.[5]

Foremost among these advocates is David Sobel, whose seminal books, Children's Special Places[6] and Mapmaking with Children,[7] apply the results of international participant-observation research with children in their native play and neighbourhood environments to the meaningful study of geography in school. Sobel's research shows how children make sense of place in different ways at various ages. When asked to draw maps of places that they know and value, young children's representation of place matures from pictorial and home-centered maps (ages 5 to 6) through to neighbourhood maps incorporating dimensionality, pathways and special places (ages 7 to 8). From here, the children's mapmaking progresses to abstract, aerial and wide-area maps, incorporating both residential and business districts (ages 11 to 12), on to formalized maps that most typify what professional geographers create (age 13 and upwards). In other words, children's mapping skills become more sophisticated as they mature, leading Sobel to conclude:

"We do a disservice to children when we jump in too quickly at a prematurely abstract level in map reading and mapmaking. It's important to have children begin mapmaking the way they begin drawing: maps and drawings are representations of things that are emotionally important to children ... . The development of emotional bonds and cognitive skills need to go hand in hand in my approach to developmentally appropriate social studies and geography." [8]

Not surprisingly, young children often situate the place-based contexts they value in relation to home.[9] So too, mapmaking at a young age functions as a developmental expression of the child's innermost need to organize, make sense of and connect with his or her immediate surroundings,[9] including home, play spaces, "secret" places, the natural world[9] and pathways and routes between places.[10]

Implications for Practice

Although Ontario's proscribed social studies curriculum can sometimes pose challenges for teachers interested in linking the content that must be covered to children's everyday lives outside of school, the curriculum is sufficiently open-ended (especially in terms of how it may be creatively taught) to allow for developmentally congruent approaches to teaching about place. Here are five strategies:

1. **Connect the study of place to children's everyday environments.**
   This includes children's home environments (both inside and out), the routes children take to school (especially if walking or biking) and the play spaces they inhabit, construct, adapt to their own purposes and imagine. Children's play spaces include both neighbourhood and playground environments, as well as constructed spaces such as forts, dens and tree houses.[11] Ask a group of younger students to draw façades of their homes. Ask a group of older students to draw top-down maps of their homes and the surrounding neighbourhoods, denoting points of interest and frequently traveled routes. Also discuss with older students the importance of "home," its significance and role in their lives.[4]

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2. Study the ways in which children construct place.

Although it is always a goal of geography education to promote disciplinary thinking,[12] it is nevertheless important for teachers to understand the subjective (if sometimes naïve) ways in which children make sense of place in order to design an effective curriculum that "moves" students gradually to a disciplinary way of thinking.[13] Ask a class of students to draw free-form maps of a favourite play space or an imaginary place they have read about in a storybook. Now interpret these maps and the accompanying explanations the students give in order to better understand how the children make sense of place.[14] Ask the students to explain why they chose to represent the scene in this particular way. Look for clues as to children's maturing understanding of complex spatial skills, such as scale, perspective, distance and orientation.

3. Use your own school as a subject for the geographical study of constructed places.

Students spend upwards of six hours a day in school. Take full advantage of this learning environment in teaching geography and mapping skills. Ask a group of young students to create a 3D model of their classroom using blocks, Play-Doh or modelling clay.[7] Then expand their study of the school environment by taking them on a walking tour of the whole building.[15] Along the way, have the students map out each area of the school they encounter, including the staff room, storage rooms and physical plant areas. Now take the students outside and have them map out the playground.[16] Invite the students to plot their favourite play spaces. Venture back inside and have a group of older students explore the directional role played by signage in the school.[17] Also have them discuss the "nested" social spaces (i.e., spaces within spaces) that make up complex environments, such as the school cafeteria and playground.[5] Finally, challenge a group of students to exercise their imaginations as they create a 3D model of the ideal classroom environment. How does the design of their ideal classroom reflect the fun educational things the students would like to do in the classroom?

4. Engage children in a study of the local community beyond the primary level.

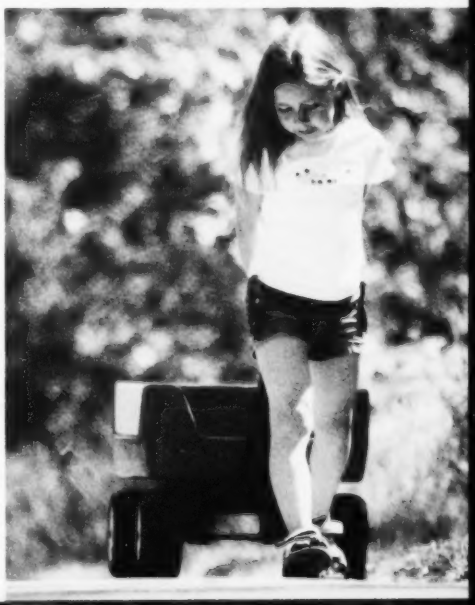
In Ontario, the local community is a Grade 1 social studies topic,[2] but there is much to be gained by returning to this topic in the later grades.[18] The study of place-related fields such as economics, urban planning and architecture[19] is strengthened when older students are provided with opportunities to concretize the study of geography by exploring the makeup and infrastructure of their local community.[20] Take the students on a walking tour of the local community. Have them map out the residential, commercial and/or industrial sectors of the area. Plot the boundaries of the school's immediate neighbourhood on a city map. Have the students research the history of the local community as they study a series of historical maps of the area.

5. Honour the virtual environments children find meaning in.

In our wired world, tech-savvy children are increasingly finding meaning in online play and learning environments,[21] as well as virtual play spaces set in video game worlds. In order to win the game, players must map out, navigate and traverse these virtual environments. This is often no easy task, since many video game environments intentionally pose challenges that contribute to the intense gameplay. Using the skills of a cartographer, challenge a group of students to map out on paper the video game environments they enjoy playing.[22] Also encourage the students to create text-based walkthroughs that guide new players through a game using words alone.[23] (Many walkthroughs are hosted at www.gamefaqs.com.) The most ambitious of young gamers can design brand-new virtual environments that they can then upload and make available for other gamers to play.

Building Numeracy Skills ...

- Use a class set of city maps to teach measurement skills. Have the students refer to the map's scale to calculate the distance between two or more intersections.
- Challenge the class to come up with a strategy for accurately measuring the outside perimeter of the school.
- On a tour of the school, have a class of younger students identify all of the different shapes they can find.
- Have a student use the leaderboard rankings in a racing video game he or she enjoys to perform a variety of calculations.
- Use a city map and the current price of fuel to determine how much it costs to get students who are bused to and from school each year. As a follow-up, have the students imagine that the whole class is bused and use a city map to determine the most efficient school bus route.



Advocates of a developmentally congruent approach to teaching argue that the social studies and geography curriculum are strengthened when teachers honour children's sense of place and the ways in which they find meaning in their everyday surroundings. A child's home, school, neighbourhood, imagined and virtual play spaces, as well as the natural world,[24,25] can all serve as meaningful starting points for promoting disciplinary thinking in geography.

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